



The Usborne
ART BOOK
about
COLOUR



In association with The National Gallery, London

The first colours

Today, choosing colours is as easy as opening a paintbox.
But the very first artists had to make colours by hand,
using whatever ingredients they could find.



Bison by an unknown artist from Altamira, Spain,
about 15-13,000 years ago

The oldest known paintings were made
tens of thousands
of years ago, on the
walls of rocky caves.
Early artists drew
black outlines with
burned wood, then
added colour with
earthy pastes.



Some earth comes naturally in a range
of colours, including reds, yellows and
browns known as ochres. These were
used by the earliest cave artists. They
are still used to make paints today.

These pots contain
coloured earths and
ochres of the kind used
by early cave artists.



Thousands of years later, in ancient Egypt, artists discovered
new materials and methods for making colours. They ground
up coloured rocks and glass, and heated ingredients to
produce a new colour, Egyptian blue.

This set of colours belonged to an Egyptian artist who lived over 3,400 years ago.



Red ochre

Green, made by mixing Egyptian
blue with yellow ochre and minerals

Egyptian blue, made by baking balls of
copper, sand and a salt called natron

Blacks made from
burned wood



This garden scene
was painted on
the wall of a rich
Egyptian's tomb.

It would have been
made with a set of
colours very like the
one above, although the
effect has faded a little
over the centuries.

Garden with
Ornamental Pool
by an unknown Egyptian
artist, about 3,350 years ago



Glass Vase (1736-95)
by an unknown Chinese artist

Sunny yellows

You might not think of metals as colourful, but lead and tin have been used to make yellow for hundreds of years.

Chemicals made from lead and tin were first used as yellows in glass-making and pottery. These chemicals are what give this glass vase its colour.

When heated, the same chemicals create an artists' colour known as lead-tin yellow.



Garden of Eden (detail of pottery tiles, 1761)
by Leonardo Chiaiese

Yellow is the colour of sunshine and is linked with joy. So it was the perfect colour to fill this picture of paradise.

These warm, orangey-yellows come from chemicals made from lead, tin and another sort of metal known as antimony.

These were painted onto pottery tiles and then baked to produce the colours.

This lady's glowing golden dress was painted in lead-tin yellow. The rich, strong colour helps to draw your eyes towards her – a new bride, in a picture created to celebrate her marriage.



Lady Elizabeth Thimbelby and her Sister
(about 1637) by Anthony van Dyck

Other natural yellows included...

Indian yellow became popular in the 15th century. It was made out of the wee of cows fed on mango leaves.



Orpiment was a rich golden yellow first used by the ancient Egyptians. It came from a poisonous rocky mineral.

Primary colours

For many artists, the primary colours of red, yellow and blue are especially important.



Simultaneous Counter-Composition (1929-30) by Theo van Doesburg

A hundred years ago, a group of artists tried to create a harmonious modern style using *only* primary colours, plus black and white, in neat blocks and lines.

Some artists even used the style on furniture.



Saint Cecilia (1620-25)
by Pietro da Cortona

This painting shows an early Christian saint. Her red, yellow and blue clothes help to make her stand out and seem quietly powerful.



Delicate variations in colour show folds and patterns in the cloth.

Here, a blocky red house stands in a stripey, blue and yellow landscape. The painter wanted to use simple shapes and primary colours to create a new, 'pure' art.



The Red House (1932)
by Kasimir Malevich